

# DEFINING EXCELLENCE: LESSONS FROM THE 2013 ASPEN PRIZE FINALISTS



## The Aspen Institute and Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence

The Aspen Institute's College Excellence Program (CEP) works to identify and replicate college practices and policies aimed at significantly improving student outcomes. A central way CEP pursues this goal is through the Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence. To administer the Prize each year, CEP gathers quantitative data about student success at the nation's community colleges and qualitative information about what is happening at institutions that are achieving high and/or improving levels of student success in four areas: learning, completion, labor market, and equitable outcomes. This guide is one of a series of publications through which the College Excellence Program will share what it has learned through the Prize's information gathering process.

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In many respects, you couldn't find a group of 10 schools more diverse than the finalists for the 2013 Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence. One community college serves 1,500 students, another 56,000. There are institutions devoted primarily—even solely—to technical degrees, and ones devoted mainly to preparing students for further academic study. A journey from college to college would take you to the Big Apple, through an Appalachian holler, into the heart of America's plains, and finally, up to a bluff overlooking the Pacific Ocean.

Although the Aspen Prize finalist colleges are different in many respects, they have one thing in common: They achieve impressive outcomes for their students in the four areas that comprise the Aspen Prize's definition of excellence:

- **Completion.** Do students earn degrees and other meaningful credentials?
- **Learning.** Do colleges set expectations for what students should learn, measure whether they are doing so, and use that information to improve?
- **Labor market outcomes.** Do graduates get well-paying jobs?
- **Equity.** Do colleges work to ensure equitable outcomes for minority, low-income, and other underserved students?

Nationally, 23 percent of first-time full-time community college students complete a credential within three years, a rate that declined by 6.7 percent between 2006 and 2010. At Aspen Prize finalist institutions, that graduation rate is, on average, 35 percent, and it has improved by 4.7 percent over the same period. Another 16 percent of students at finalist colleges transferred to a four-year college without first receiving an associate's degree, bringing student success rates at Prize finalists above 50 percent. In this paper, we identify and illuminate the qualities we believe contribute to these impressive outcomes at the finalist colleges and at other successful community colleges around the country.

These colleges did not achieve better student outcomes because they enrolled students who were easier to reach or better prepared than others—some finalist schools, in fact, serve students far needier and regions far poorer than the national average. It was not solely because they chose the “right” textbooks, or remedial education reforms, or online learning platforms. Of course those things matter. But even when colleges choose their approaches wisely, excellence requires more: leaders who build an environment where every professor and staff member is willing to accept tough realities and is committed to improving student success, and where every administrator makes sure they have the tools to do so.

It might seem that there is a measure of alchemy as to why one institution succeeds where another doesn't. But in-depth study, including site visits, of the finalist colleges revealed clear patterns among these varied institutions—they are alike, it is clear, in many ways that tie closely to strong results for students.

Finalist colleges—and successful community colleges around the country—share a singular focus on student achievement. Likely, the leaders of every college in the country would say they “put students first.” But that rhetoric means nothing unless the notion is put into practice in meaningful and consistent ways. Effective colleges have strong leaders so committed to improving outcomes that they are willing to take risks others might not, or that at other schools would lead to debilitating dissention. And every administrator, teacher, and staff member is given the message that he or she is personally responsible for taking action to improve student success.

Alone, that commitment to students is not enough; it must be translated into deliberate actions that lead to measurable improvements. Effective colleges continually examine where they need to improve student outcomes, facilitate the risk-taking that will get them there, and measure whether their efforts are working. They pay attention to what students are—and aren't—learning in class or online, and understand that teaching and learning can always be improved. They foster an environment of collaboration, where people reach across levels and departments to work together to improve graduation rates. They ensure their programs will lead directly to the next step, be it a desirable job or transfer to (and graduation from) a four-year school, and make that clear to students. They understand that community college students need a lot of guidance and support, and they are always thinking about how to reach the most vulnerable students.

## EXCELLENT COLLEGES FOCUS ON TEACHING AND LEARNING.

It seems obvious to say: Nothing matters more than what happens in the classroom. Yet few community colleges pay enough attention to what students are learning, and how. The best schools do, in structured, actionable ways. They believe that there are certain things students should learn in a given course, no matter their instructor, no matter their campus, no matter whether the course is taught face-to-face or online. They aim to provide the rigor that will help students in their next steps, whether that means in the next course in a sequence, at a university, or on the job.



While the development of student learning outcomes is still nascent at many community colleges, some are already using them in powerful ways. Departments are coming together to determine what students should know and be able to do, figure out how to measure that, and—of utmost importance—adjust instruction based on the results. When professors have only their own students' results to look at, they are limited in the conclusions they can draw. When faculty members collaborate, however, common challenges emerge and can be addressed together.

West Kentucky Community and Technical College, in Paducah, is one of the national leaders in using student learning outcomes and common assessments to improve instruction, and thus results. One of many examples: With nearly 400 West Kentucky students taking Anatomy and Physiology (A&P) I each fall, from as many as 10 instructors, faculty and administrators realized that they had to do more to ensure that every student

was ready for nursing or whatever else came next. So they developed a common final exam. When they were first able to look at aggregate results, they saw significant weaknesses. “Our student learning outcomes weren’t nearly as high as we’d hoped that they’d be,” particularly in the nervous system, says Karen Hlinka, dean of science and math. “It was like, ‘Oh, wow.’”

The dean and faculty got to work: They changed the textbook, introduced peer tutoring, began to use more microscope slides in class, and replaced cat dissection with expensive physical models and computer dissection software. For students who found themselves in way over their heads, the department created a refresher course they could enroll in mid-term and return to A&P better prepared the following term. The moves but yielded results: improved course completion and retention rates.

It’s important to note that when defining and working to meet student learning goals, effective colleges do not water down the material. If anything, they make it more rigorous. When West Kentucky instructors found that expectations diverged in remedial and college-level writing courses, they worked together to create a scoring rubric that raised expectations, and in turn increased rates of proficiency. Santa Barbara City College designed its writing center to tutor students toward the expectations of the University of California system, where many students aim to transfer, rather than just their next community college courses.

### *Developmental education*

An even greater challenge comes in the area of developmental, or remedial, education. Nationwide, three in five students arrive at community colleges in need of remedial courses, and most of those students fail to complete college, or even the college-level courses that follow their remedial ones. This is the case even at successful colleges. But what sets them apart is the tremendous energy they are putting into solving this problem.

There is no one program, no one approach, that has been proven to be a magic bullet. Through constant and considered innovation, community colleges across the country are aiming for dramatic improvements, not just incremental ones. Gone are the days at most finalist community colleges where students assigned to remedial education sit in a semester-long class with a professor who teaches math or reading or writing the same way it is taught in high school.

Because remedial classes, which typically cost students money but garner them no credit, can feel like a grind, some colleges are attempting to make them more engaging and relevant. Brazosport College in southeast Texas has introduced three different remedial math pathways—industrial math, statistics, or math for academic transfer—so students can choose the one that best suits them. And instructors at a few colleges are “flipping” the classroom: providing videos that deliver the material outside of class, then using class time to answer questions and facilitate students as they solve problems in groups.

More often, interventions are designed to speed things up, to help students complete remedial education sooner so they can progress toward their degrees, saving money and time. Most finalist colleges are experimenting with the delivery of remedial coursework online in computer labs, where students work at their own pace and turn to professors or assistants for help. Some have even done away with some freestanding developmental education courses altogether, instead embedding remedial help into college-level courses. Remedial instructors co-teach the introductory classes in the water management, certified nursing assistant, and early childhood education programs at Walla Walla Community College in western Washington State; Kingsborough Community College in Brooklyn allows students who just missed the cutoff for college-level work to take English 101 classes with the help of remedial tutors. Kingsborough also offers compressed courses, which teach a semester’s worth of remedial math in as little as a week.

At Kingsborough Community College, promising outcomes have resulted from the CUNY Start program, which provides intensive remediation to students—25 hours per week for 12 to 18 weeks—so students can complete their developmental coursework in a fraction of the time it had previously taken. At Santa Barbara City College, students in the Express to Success program, mostly low-income minorities, take two remedial math or English courses at a time, four days a week for a semester, in “learning communities” of their peers. Accelerating coursework for the neediest students sounds counterintuitive, but data show that students in Express to Success are two-thirds more likely to pass two English classes in one semester than other students were to pass those classes over two semesters. Professors eliminate material that overlaps in the two courses and give computerized drills for homework; with the saved course time, faculty members are able to help students with conceptual understanding. “When they told me about the learning community, I was really scared—it’s too much math!” says Cindy Gonzalez, 29. The program turned out to be layered with so much support, she says, that success was almost a given. “Now I’m done. I’m a tutor, and I’m on my way”—to UCLA.

### *Professional development*

Effective community colleges strive to build faculties capable of executing the reforms they count on to make a difference for students, through deliberate hiring and training processes. They make an explicit effort to hire faculty members who are committed to growing as teachers, and give them the resources they need to do so. Some finalist colleges hire experienced professors from nearby high schools and four-year colleges, some right from the workforce even if they have never taught. All, though, use the hiring process to make sure new faculty members share the values of the college, will contribute to the community, prioritize teaching, and are eager to grow for the sake of their students.

When Brazosport College began a college-wide effort to focus closely on student outcomes, administrators in many departments changed the scoring rubric used to rate teaching applicants. “The emphasis now is not as much on their academic credentials, but on whether they have improved in the art of teaching,” says Jeff Detrick, chair of math and life sciences. A hiring committee of Detrick’s recently chose a candidate with five years of experience who sought out every training opportunity over one with 20 years of experience “but no evidence he had done anything differently over those 20 years.” The new hire, he says, has proven to be exactly what the college now prizes: active, vibrant, committed to growth and to students.

Many finalist colleges have formal programs to link new faculty members, or any instructor who wants help, to experienced mentors. At Lake Area Technical Institute, in Watertown, South Dakota, and at West Kentucky, new professors meet monthly for classes that address lesson design, assessment, and how to incorporate hands-on activities into instruction. Given the growth of distance learning, and the fact that students typically do not complete online classes at the same rate they do face-to-face ones, Broward College trained 19 “e-learning associates,” instructors with good technology skills who help their peers understand what constitutes excellent virtual teaching.

Interventions to improve teaching can be most successful when they are accompanied by in-depth training. When research showed that reading skills were holding West Kentucky students back, the college began a five-year effort to train teachers to teach students through common, effective reading strategies. The college didn’t rely on occasional, optional workshops. Administrators built a system in which instructors from across the college were grouped into cohorts that met monthly, for a year, to learn how to instill in students the importance of careful reading, help them understand the purpose of assignments, and teach note-taking and other skills. In those meetings, instructors—in both academic and technical fields—shared what worked and what didn’t.

To make sure his studio art students were truly comprehending and responding to their reading assignments and not just parroting them back to him, West Kentucky professor Paul Aho taught them the 3-2-1 strategy, which he had learned in his training: They write about three surprising things they learned from the reading, two things they found interesting, and one question they have. “All of my students thought those exercises were very, very productive,” Aho says.

Over five years, half of West Kentucky’s full-time faculty members took part in the training. By every measure—the number of students who use the new reading strategies, how prepared they feel for class, and, most important, how they score on reading proficiency tests—the effort has worked remarkably.

## **EXCELLENT COLLEGES ARE SYSTEMATIC AND INNOVATIVE IN THEIR QUEST TO IMPROVE.**

It used to be easy to remain in the dark about what wasn’t working at Broward College. Before the college joined Achieving the Dream, a national program that helps community colleges use evidence to improve student outcomes, faculty members were not aware that half of students who started a remedial course sequence didn’t complete it. “They didn’t believe it,” says Patti Barney, vice president of information technology. “There was this year or more of disbelief and us parading around saying, ‘Believe it.’” Only with that understanding was the college able to move to the next step: “What are we going to do about it?”

You can’t create urgency for improvement unless faculty and staff understand how serious problems are and agree that it’s their job to help solve them. Successful schools build the research and information systems necessary to analyze and synthesize data about student outcomes and needs, and their leaders are skilled at making everyone aware of—and invested in using—that information. Participating in Achieving the Dream helped not just Broward but also College of the Ozarks in central Arkansas and Brazosport College become schools that systematically use research to drive improvement.



Kingsborough Community College, which recently joined Achieving the Dream, has for a decade been working to build a culture of evidence. “Data were always there,” says Richard Fox, Kingsborough’s dean of institutional effectiveness and strategic planning. “Now they’re actually getting used.” Routine reports on course completion and success at Kingsborough have long showed a consistent pattern: Students who took English in their first semester were more likely to reenroll the next term than students who didn’t; that gap grew even greater after two terms. Under the leadership of administrators focused on student success data, the school finally did something about it: require English for all students in their first semester. Regina Peruggi, the president, makes very clear her focus on student outcomes; every year she attends a faculty meeting in each department, where she hands out and discusses a booklet enumerating how the department is doing on metrics like course completion and retention.

Of course, it's not enough to use data to identify problems. Effective colleges intentionally respond with interventions, closely monitor their effectiveness, and make midcourse corrections when needed. "We look at that data assiduously, we report on it, and we act on what's not working," says Alice Scharper, a dean of education programs at Santa Barbara City College. For instance, Santa Barbara has embedded peer tutors in hundreds of classes, but an annual program evaluation showed that students were not visiting those tutors as often as hoped. So faculty were asked to develop ways to increase tutor visits and came up with several, including giving students grades for seeing tutors and assigning homework that explicitly requires visiting the tutor. As it does with all its reforms, the college will look closely at whether the changes make a difference.

### *Innovation cultures*

Most of Santa Barbara's innovative initiatives were developed with the active involvement of professors. Even when hiring, administrators are looking for people who have "a track record of taking innovative ideas and trying to make them successful," says executive vice president Jack Friedlander. At orientation, faculty members continue to get the message: They are expected not just to contribute but to be ready to lead by the end of their first year.

Santa Fe College in Gainesville, Florida, also relies on professors to drive change. The faculty senate, as well as councils representing staff and students, must sign off on any new policy, whether it's a smoking ban or an instructional redesign. What's more, says Jackson Sasser, the Santa Fe president, the people responsible for executing reforms must play the primary role in designing them, especially those related to student learning.

Certainly putting control in the hands of faculty, rather than simply mandating reforms from the top, can extend the time it takes for things to get done. It can be a challenge for administrators used to a more top-down governance structure. And at institutions with poor student outcomes and atmospheres of mistrust, such an approach might not do much good. But at healthy colleges like Santa Barbara and Santa Fe, leaders insist the approach results in strong buy-in. "I ask both faculty and departmental administrations to try to be visionary," says Santa Fe provost Ed Bonahue. "'What challenges do students continually face . . . and what can you do in your department to help students cross that barrier?' And faculty rise to the occasion."

## **EXCELLENT COLLEGES BUILD BRIDGES.**

At Aspen Prize finalist colleges, there are few islands. Administrators, faculty, and staff reach across departments and divisions and even outside the college—whatever direction they can—to pave new roads to student success. Collaboration is certainly evident among top administrators (and at some finalist colleges, achieving this was a new development). But it is even more impressive to see widespread and consistent collaboration among faculty members from different departments. Students need to learn the right things in biology in order to complete the nursing program. They need to succeed in English composition if they are to



get a psychology degree. Professors at effective colleges think nothing of picking up the phone, or visiting each other's offices, to discuss whether their courses are sufficiently aligned and rigorous.

Across the country, it is common for college-level instructors to complain about the skills students lack after they complete remedial courses. At successful colleges, professors are no longer working alone behind closed doors—they are working together to improve the situation. For six years, the developmental and college-level math faculty members at Santa Fe have been meeting weekly. By collaborating, they were able to remove overlap between their courses and, ultimately, completely redesign the remedial sequence. Working together “really opened up a lot of conversations,” says instructor Maria Rinehart. “It has been the greatest thing we ever did.”

Most successful colleges have many channels through which student services and instructional staffs work together. At Santa Barbara and at West Kentucky, each counselor links with specific academic departments and attends those faculty meetings regularly, to talk about student needs and to make sure professors communicate to their classes what support services are available. In learning communities at several colleges, students take academic classes alongside courses in learning and life skills often taught by student services staff. The teachers work together to create joint assignments and discuss and meet students’ needs.

At Walla Walla Community College, some of the most innovative tools to improve student success have been the product of longstanding collaboration between the information technology and student services departments, which meet weekly. Together, they conceived and developed an online portal that enables students and staff to always know where a student stands in his or her path to completion.

### *Connections with K-12*

At finalist community colleges, leaders understand that collaboration must reach beyond the schools themselves, because that is what students need. With college readiness a national problem, effective schools don’t wait until students enroll; they begin to get them ready and motivated for college while they are still in high school. Nearly every community college offers some way for high school students to take college classes, and some have formalized this through dual enrollment and early college high schools on campus. But it requires special effort to ensure that the high school students succeed, and follow through by enrolling in college.

Nowhere is that more evident than at Santa Barbara City College. Santa Barbara’s president meets twice a month with the superintendent of the largest local school district. High school principals meet quarterly with the college deans, high school counselors meet twice yearly with admissions staff and deans, and high school and college English and math teachers meet regularly as well.

Among the fruits of their collaboration: Curriculum in key courses has been aligned over the years so that in high school, students learn precisely what they need to in order to succeed in college. Students take the math and English placement tests in high school, early enough so that if they have trouble, they can receive help to avoid remedial coursework. And through a new program, called Get Focused ... Stay Focused!, students must take courses throughout high school where they learn how to navigate college and create and update a 10-year plan for their education and career.

“I’ve been a superintendent in three other communities with city colleges, and there’s nothing like the relationship here,” says David Cash, who runs the Santa Barbara Unified School District.

## EXCELLENT COLLEGES SHOW STUDENTS HOW THEIR EDUCATION WILL LEAD DIRECTLY TO THE NEXT STEP.

Among the most innovative leaders in driving economic growth is Walla Walla Community College president Steven VanAusdle. VanAusdle believes that the success of the local economy and the success of his students are inextricably linked—so he focuses on the former just as much as the latter. Under his leadership, the college has fueled a tenfold increase in the local winemaking industry, through the creation of its enology and viticulture degree. It has opened a water and environmental center, which facilitates community partnerships

to restore a watershed and, therefore, treasured fish runs to the area—to the benefit of local farmers, Native Americans, and, of course, graduates, who can look forward to a variety of good jobs in the area. Now, it is investing heavily in programs to service wind turbines and fuel the growth of other, emerging renewable energy programs. While small towns elsewhere in rural America struggle, VanAusdle's college has helped create a bright future for residents in its local community.



In economies that are already strong, community colleges respond to employer needs by making sure they deliver job-ready graduates. Every week, Brian Olson, an agriculture instructor at Lake Area Technical Institute, gets a visit from a local employer. Always, Olson asks, “What can we do differently, what do we need to improve?” Sometimes the answers are technical, about

which technologies are coming down the pike or how the school farm can be managed. Sometimes they reflect workplace habits, like punctuality or interview attire. Always, they shape what Olson expects of his students, whom he sees first and foremost as future employees.

As at Lake Area, effective community colleges technical programs treat every course as practice for the workplace. Area businesses are considered vital partners, providing crucial information about how graduates are doing and prompting the appropriate adjustments. Advisory boards, committees of local professionals experienced in a given field, are commonplace at community colleges, serving as modest supporters of existing programs but rarely helping to reshape what is taught. Successful colleges, though, make the most of those boards, constantly seeking feedback and changing curricula based on what they learn. Programs add new technologies on the advice of industry experts: flexible bronchoscopy for respiratory care programs, alternative fuels for auto mechanic programs, electronic health records for nursing programs. Frequently, feedback about graduates has prompted programs that are heavy on technical skills to add interpersonal training as well: how to interview, take doctors' orders, work well with colleagues.

At times, programs are reworked, or eliminated. The maritime program at Kingsborough Community College was not getting enough students or placing graduates in good jobs. So program director Anthony DiLernia went to local employers to find out why. “Tell me the skill set you want employees to have,” he said. He had been running a traditional program, in which students choose an area of specialization, but employers made clear that for the smaller ships in New York Harbor, crew members need both engineering and on-deck skills. Walla Walla got rid of its carpentry program because the construction industry was faltering in the recession and graduates were not getting high-paying jobs. It closed and then a few years later reopened its culinary program, reforming it from one that data showed resulted in low-paying kitchen work into one designed to prepare graduates for higher-paying jobs in the growing tourist economy, such as catering and running a food truck.

At Brazosport, the petrochemical companies are so eager to hire graduates that they helped design and fund state-of-the-art technical facilities on campus. Because they send their own employees there for training, they're in regular—sometimes daily—contact with instructors and have been able to design “a learning environment that is almost the same as a plant environment,” says Gary Hicks, chair of the process technology division.

Certainly the fact that area petrochemical companies enthusiastically hire Brazosport College graduates into jobs with high salaries contributes to the college’s improving completion rates. When students see others like them experience success in real life, it is powerful—they want to follow suit, and can see exactly how. Likewise, Lake Area Technical Institute, located in a region with a strong economy, has numerous programs whose job placement rate is more than 90 percent, and its overall completion rate is among the nation’s highest. When you’re pretty much assured a job upon graduation, you’ve got great incentive to follow through.

But the economic landscape can only ever tell part of the story. No company would be happy to rely on a college’s graduates if the college wasn’t turning out skilled, motivated employees. “They truly need a state-of-the art education to provide excellence for our business. That’s the only way we get better,” says Ed Mallett, a regional vice president for the energy and grains firm CHS Inc. Mallett and others in South Dakota know that when they hire a Lake Area graduate, they’re getting someone who has spent two years fully committed to a path, was inspired and educated by talented and dedicated instructors, and trained on top-notch equipment.

Employer enthusiasm for a college is often also linked to relationships with its leaders. Almost uniformly, colleges that have strong relationships with local industry are led by presidents who energetically seek out those connections and even act to drive economic growth. When Brazosport leaders learned that \$4 billion in investments were headed to the area petrochemical industry, they outlined a program to deliver the technicians that would be needed, rather than waiting to be asked. “The strategic vision here is unlike what we’ve seen elsewhere,” says Chris Witte, site manager of the local BASF plant.

When Citrix Systems, a multinational software company, was considering moving its operational headquarters from Fort Lauderdale to California, Broward College president David Armstrong was at the table with the county development office and Citrix leadership. Bob Swindell, executive director of the Greater Fort Lauderdale Alliance, says, “David could have walked away from those meetings, and nobody would have thought twice if nothing materialized from Broward College, but he maintained the conversation and said, ‘How can we be a part of solving this problem?’” Citrix decided to stay in Ft. Lauderdale, in part because of Broward’s relationship with the firm. Likewise, executives of a call center that opened in Malvern, Arkansas, said they came largely because of the enthusiasm and flexibility they found in the leaders of College of the Ozarks. Other business leaders agree that they’ve had far better luck partnering with the college than with schools in the many other areas they have plants in.

### *Paths to transfer*

Students who intend to go from community college straight to four-year college need the benefit of clear pathways. It’s not enough for a community college or its state to set up articulation agreements, where four-year schools agree to accept certain courses for transfer but may not actually accept many students. Community colleges must set up systems so students know exactly what options are open to them beyond community college and what steps are required to get there, certainly. But where colleges really benefit students is by helping them make the jump from community college to a four-year school feel really like no leap at all.

For 1,000 students each year, attending Santa Fe College is like driving on an express thruway to the University of Florida (UF). The Santa Fe campus has dedicated UF advisers and a UF student center on campus, and its required online personalized learning plan software is coded with the prerequisites from dozens of four-year schools, UF included, so that students know at all times exactly how their course selection lines up with their intent to transfer. Qualified Santa Fe students can move straight from their associate degrees into online University of Florida bachelor of science programs created exclusively for Santa Fe graduates, in fields including business management and health education.

“We are very closely knit,” says UF provost Joe Glover. “Students who come to Santa Fe intending to go to the University of Florida can identify from day one with the University of Florida and can really establish their goal and their vision. That’s a very powerful motivating force for the students to do well in their studies.”

Even when students don’t have a specific four-year college in mind right away, effective community colleges help them ensure a smooth and quick progression. California policy prioritizes community college students in university admissions, but that’s not the only reason so many Santa Barbara students transfer and complete their bachelor’s degrees. When it comes to ensuring the necessary credentials for four-year schools, they can turn to a set of advisers specifically dedicated to transfer. When it comes to acquiring the necessary skills and knowledge, they are surrounded by professors who understand what it takes to be genuinely prepared for the junior year, provided a first-rate writing center, and in other ways held to academic standards tuned to the eventual university-level diploma.

## EXCELLENT COLLEGES UNDERSTAND THAT COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS NEED SUPPORT.

For many students at four-year schools, college has been a lifelong destiny, an experience mapped out by their parents’ background and their schools’ expectations since kindergarten. For many community college students, that’s hardly the case. One-quarter of community college students have children. The vast majority hold jobs outside of school. Many have not been in school for years. Nearly half have parents who did not attend college. The best community colleges understand all of these risk factors, so they build support systems so strong that students say it would be hard for them to fail.



Because even the process of entering college can be intimidating, many finalist colleges have thoughtfully redesigned their registration processes. When Amber’lee Douglas, 29, first enrolled at West Kentucky Community and Technical College a decade ago, registration took students to so many different locations around campus that it resembled a scavenger hunt. “It felt like nobody was going to miss you if you wanted to back out the door.” Since then the college has built a one-stop center where students can register, get advised right away, apply for financial aid, and receive other services, in a comfortable setting with plenty of assistance. “When you’re greeted, you feel

obligated to do something,” Douglas says. “The building is so much more welcoming. It feels like a *college*. It feels positive.” Brian Levine, 35, registered for West Kentucky without even entering the building—a veteran, he enrolled by Skype from Baghdad. The veterans’ affairs coordinator “got all the information for me to get in line before I even got home. I had almost everything done before I even walked on campus.”

Likewise, several finalist colleges have revamped their enrollment and orientation processes in recent years, in ways that have reduced lines and increased engagement and success. Kingsborough switched from a stressful, chaotic registration process that was held in an arena two weeks before classes began to a system that provides incentives to register in the spring for the fall term, funnels students into new academic preparation programs, and has improved the rate of students showing up for class. Brazosport College doubled orientation to two days—one for the typical activities and the other for math tutoring and assessment—and reduced remedial placements for students who attended the tutoring.

At some community colleges, orientation may be the only time a student is required to see an adviser. Others, though, understand the importance of one-on-one guidance and require it more frequently. Students at Walla Walla must see an adviser each quarter before registering until they have proven themselves successful. “They’ve got to have a clear pathway and understand where they are on that pathway and what does it take to get to the goal line,” says Wendy Samitore, vice president of student services. “And I think that the advising that we’ve put into place has really been helpful.” As well, two “completion coaches” on campus connect with students who are flagged by professors as struggling or at risk of dropping out.

One of the most common ways finalist colleges provide guidance is through student success courses, where students learn study skills, such as note-taking and reading strategies; life skills, such as stress relief and time management; and financial planning. They learn to navigate the college and are helped to create career and academic plans. Brazosport works particularly hard at ensuring its student success courses are effective, assigning most sections to full-time professors who teach only student success. Several colleges also organize students into small learning communities, where they take two to four courses together over a semester—for example, remedial writing, college psychology, and student success. The professors work together to create cross-disciplinary, engaging assignments and try to identify and address individual students’ needs, and the students encourage each other to succeed. Kingsborough offers learning communities from remediation all the way through upper-level courses. About two-fifths of Kingsborough freshmen belong to learning communities, which independent research found increases their chances for success at the school.

At effective colleges, students need not go far to find academic help, whenever they need it. Santa Barbara City College is dotted generously with tutoring centers, including a writing center staffed from 9 a.m. to 7 p.m. by professionals who are trained to help students not just improve specific pieces of writing, but become better equipped for the next assignment. All Santa Barbara remedial courses, and many college-level ones too, have trained student tutors, who were successful in the class and now sit through it again, helping students inside and outside the classroom. Having a peer as a teacher of sorts, says remedial math teacher Bronwen Moore, “is living proof to my students that there is a future.”

### *Faculty’s role in retention*

Successful community colleges know that for the populations they serve, student motivation and engagement are never guaranteed. While many community colleges might think such things are beyond their control, exceptional colleges know otherwise. West Kentucky instructors are taught at convocation how to include interactive activities in their lessons. At Lake Area, where all students are in technical programs, instructors are told to get students doing hands-on work the first week or two of classes, and general education instructors create classes geared toward students’ true interests: An agriculture student might not be thrilled about taking math, but if all the homework problems deal with feed ratios, the medicine may go down easier.

One thing that is manifest: Students at successful schools feel that faculty and staff are personally invested in their success. Joseph Howard, a 44-year-old student at Southeast Kentucky Community and Technical College, was recently so perplexed by a unit in his remedial math class that he had to retake the quiz several

times. “I was just ready to throw in the towel,” he says. His professor, though, was not. “She kept staying with me, and working with me, and she just wouldn’t let go,” Howard says. “After a while the fog went away, and it hit me—which is what she said was going to happen. If she hadn’t done that, I believe I would have been out of here.”

On small campuses like Southeast Kentucky’s, this culture comes somewhat naturally; professors who know all students’ names and see them in town and teach them in class more than once tend to notice—and reach out—when students are struggling. But even the biggest schools can make an effort to hire people who are willing to make personal connections with students, and who believe all students are capable of great things. Even the biggest schools can make clear to their employees that must do all they can to help each student succeed.

Again and again, students at finalist colleges said that if they did not show up for class, their teachers would notice. When they needed help, they knew where to get it. They knew there were nets to catch them if they fell. They felt cared for. Mary Lou Gutierrez, 20, a student at Brazosport College in southeast Texas, summed it up well: “The faculty members, they all have their different teaching styles; they all teach different topics. But it seems like they’re all unified in one common goal, and that’s helping students succeed. I’ve seen that in every single class that I’ve taken.”

Says Bronwen Moore, a remedial math teacher at Santa Barbara, “We’re the first people to get our hands on them in college. We’re acutely aware of that. … The student has to master the material—barely passing is not good—but they also need to feel like teachers are on their side. And they need to have a vision, a goal. They need to leave our class saying, ‘I’m in college because of’—and you help them fill in the blank.”

## **EXCELLENT COLLEGES ALWAYS THINK ABOUT HOW TO REACH AND SERVE THE NEEDIEST STUDENTS.**

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Moreso than at any other higher education institutions in America, community colleges serve as the gateway to higher education for minority and low-income students. There are colleges that passively accept that reality, admitting whoever shows up. Others are passionate and deliberate about finding and serving the students who need them most.

That starts with recruitment. Santa Fe College visits the local high schools with the lowest graduation rates for African Americans and signs students up for a program that teaches them life skills, orients them to the college, and pairs them with college student mentors. When officials at Walla Walla noticed that local students in poverty were not participating in the state’s dual-credit program, the college waived fees for those students—which doubled the percentage of low-income students in the program.

Most community colleges offer workforce training and adult education; excellent colleges see the people enrolled in those courses as potential college graduates. Where it can, Kingsborough builds its workforce training programs out of existing college-level courses, with the same teachers and standards, so that participants may bank training credits to apply to college degrees down the road. Walla Walla offers adult education programs at local workplaces, such as a meatpacking plant, then works to move those students into college. And at two local corrections facilities, Walla Walla offers not just vocational programs, like diesel mechanics and graphic design, but also associate degree programs, which is atypical in prison education.

Several efforts give minority and low-income students the support and encouragement they need to succeed. Southeast Kentucky Community and Technical College, which is located in an isolated, mountainous region of Appalachia, recruits single mothers on welfare into college through a program that provides them a rich array of financial and academic supports. “We work with people who have no idea that college is for them,” says program coordinator Roland Cornett. “Summer bridge” programs at several schools offer several weeks of college preparation to at-risk students before classes start. The Scholar House at West Kentucky provides 48 apartments and full-time day care for single mothers with children who are enrolled full-time in college. At Santa Barbara, a new program recruits minority students into science, technology, and math majors, provides an introductory class that gives them a taste of the content and rigor, and then supports them through their studies.

Mentoring and tutoring programs specifically for black male students have yielded measurable success at College of the Ozarks and Santa Fe. Broward College, where one-third of students are foreign-born, offers a robust program in English for non-native speakers; learning communities with courses themed to particular interests, such as Hispanic American literature, or taught exclusively by minorities from the groups they are targeting; and personal outreach to ensure that disadvantaged students enroll in special programs. Efforts have resulted in an unusually small achievement gap for minority students.

### *Financial aid and beyond*

Although community college tuition is relatively low, so too are the means of most community college students. Successful community colleges ensure that financial issues don’t stand in the way of completion, and don’t unduly burden students after graduation. Many community colleges try to maximize the amount of student financial aid their students receive; exceptional colleges go further. Kingsborough Community College has for 17 years run Single Stop, a center on campus that helps students receive the services they need. College employees connect students (including international and undocumented students without access to public benefits) with transportation aid, legal assistance, and community resources; process food stamp and welfare applications; and help students fill out tax and financial aid forms at the same time. Jeremiah Lindgren, 28, attributes his success to Single Stop. “I’ve been able to do work hours on campus, I’ve been able to keep my benefits, and still maintain a 3.6 average,” he says. “They work with you to get the best out of the system.”

Broward College has reformed its approach to vastly expand access to financial aid. Financial aid officials reached out to faculty to get their help in processing withdrawals, attendance, and other factors that affect aid. They evened out the allocation of aid so that it didn’t just go to students with no financial contribution; needy students who were working could receive funds as well. They contacted students one by one to see if they were still working—before, students might have lost their jobs and not notified the college, thereby forgoing the extra aid they could be receiving. A consultant was brought in to make the financial aid process more efficient, which greatly reduced wait time for aid packages, as well as appeals.



And they began to require two hours of counseling before doling out loans. Several colleges are doing this work: attempting to minimize debt load by changing the dialogue from what students want to borrow to what they truly need, and by no longer automatically offering loans. Broward considered it a great success that this past year, two in five students decided not to take the loans they qualified for. Says Rana Hutson, an information analyst in financial aid, “We tell them, ‘Maybe we can find you a scholarship, put you in work study—find something else besides putting yourself in debt.’”

At every Aspen Prize finalist college, we found students who said that other institutions had given up on them, but that this one would not. At every finalist college, students said it was hard to fail at their school. Whether financial, academic, or motivational, the lifelines were there, they said—you just had to make sure to grab them.

There is no doubt that students often come to community colleges with profound academic deficiencies and personal challenges. Too often, colleges interpret those challenges as a pass to settle for mediocre outcomes. The Aspen Prize colleges prove that excellence is not a function of the demographics of their student bodies. Schools accomplish great things for students by working constantly and mindfully to improve teaching and learning. They lay out clear pathways that lead to graduation, to further education, to good jobs. And they work hard both inside and outside the institution to make sure those roads are well-traveled by students and graduates. They believe they have the obligation to help all students meet their goals. Above all, they set high expectations, for their students and for themselves—and they always know exactly how far they still have to go and what they must do next to meet those expectations.





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